

# **Dasturii Khurshed Shapurii Dabu (April 20.1889 - October 30,1979) - A Life Sketch & Reminiscences**

- Dr. Kersey H. Antia

Few people that I came in contact with in my life since early childhood have influenced my philosophy of life and shaped my character and mission in life, as well as my spiritual ideals and goals, as profoundly as Dastuiji Dabu. And there are many who came under his spiritual shadow that will loudly proclaim the same. I came under the sphere of his inspiring influence at the age of ten when he became the principal of Cama Athoman Institute, in Andheri, Bombay, a year after I joined it as a student. But first let me backtrack and try to present his biography as, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been attempted so far, except for a one-page article in *Jame Jamshed Weekly* by Dr. Hilla Wadia (January 23, 2005, page 8) – full of information and dates and events chronicling his early life. It tallies so well with all I have heard and known about him and so I have incorporated it here somewhat. While I am so grateful to her for providing these data, I regret I do not have her concluding article on Dabu's later life. But fortunately I am quite familiar with his life since 1948 when I came to live under his spiritual shadow and guidance.

## **EARLY LIFE & EDUCATION**

He was born in Navsari on April 20, 1889, which to my recollection, has some connection with the hero of Navsari, Khurshed Bapa with whom he shared his birthday, as well as his name. So his mother, Dosibai thought he was an Avatar, a reincarnation of him and his early achievements seems to have borne it out. He was her only son, but she did not spoil him, and raised him very strictly. He had at least one sister, as I remember her visiting him at least once at the Cama Institute, and as one of my relatives married her daughter, a sister of Ervad Peshotan Peer, my senior in years, but my junior in the Avesta-Pahlavi class, and a very noble soul, in the image of Dastuiji Dabu, you can see. One can imagine how hard the life must have been for Dabu when he lost his father at the age of nine. But his mother persuaded him to study and even to go to Wilson College in Bombay to advance his career. His mother seems to have been a really motivating factor in his life, though I am a little surprised as I write this that he never averred to her in hundreds of speeches I heard of this stoic Dastur and stoic is the word that sticks in my mind as I describe him. He attended Dadabhai Tata School and Sir C. J. Madressa. But he also received priestly training under a very well known but strict priestly trainer, a usual

practice then and became Navar and Martab. The priest under whom he studied and received training for priesthood were all notorious for being over-strict and over-zealous for observing priestly conduct and rules. Such stories of their harshness and strictness were part of our growing up, some even boasting about how much it helped them to grow up and be better priests and persons. I think it explains why Dabu tended to be very strict, even ferocious, with his charges when he was in command of them. Such harshness on the part of the Guru was regarded then as a plus, and contributed to his effectiveness and success as a teacher. It was as if a barometer of his success in the eyes of others.

Dabu often cited an incidence when his priestly trainer made him take a bath, and even throw away things on which some drops fell from his mouth while gargling. Yet he maintained that he derived greater satisfaction putting on the priestly robe than even the robe for obtaining his degrees at the university conventions, even though in those days two Afargan prayers fetched only one anna. He practiced Mobedi from 1901-1906 and studied Avesta-Pahlavi languages. He stood first in his school in the Metric exam in 1906 and seventh in the Old Bombay State.

He became a staunch vegetarian in 1902, and so when he was married to Jerbai, an angelic lady we all admired, on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 1907, he made sure only vegetarian meals were served at the wedding. As he was still in college until 1910, he asked his wife and her family not to have any relations, even correspondence with her, until he finished college in 1910. Now I understand why he advised me not to get married until I finish my studies, though I was not far from it, and had already worked for five years as a Tata officer. At the Cama Institute we used to observe Jerbai praying religiously and observing a saintly low profile. She was an embodiment of wifely virtues. She had an abiding faith in her husband always doing the right thing and being above reproach. She was hardly phased by the constant criticism levied against him week after week by the Ilme-Kshnumists in their weekly Parsi Aavaz. She evinced the same stoic qualities as her husband and emulated his simplicity and unassuming nature in every way. Unfortunately, however, she suffered from bad eyesight and eventually went blind around 1950, when Dabu Saheb, as we called him, took care of her diligently as she had taken care of him earlier. But it took a toll on him too, as it always happens in the long run, as was evident to others from his wrinkled clothes. But being so stoic they did not matter to him. Even I was not aware of this until my mentor late Jiloobai Vakeel pointed it out to me while comparing it with the immaculate attire of Dastur Bode. After Jerbai passed away he tried to live on his own until he fell down and fractured his leg, and no longer could will his disability away with his uncanny will power. His son Noshir, as relayed to me by Dastur Kotwal, with great

difficulty, persuaded him to move with him to Ahmedabad where he passed away gently on October 30,1979.

## **A LIFE - LONG THEOSOPHIST**

After passing his Master's degree in Avesta-Pahlavi with flying colors in 1912, he happened to run into a stray page from the Theosophist magazine, *Cherag* which I saw stacked on my father's library as a child as it was quite popular then. The page carried an advertisement for the position of Assistant Principal for a school in Kanpur run by the Theosophical Society. The pay was meager, but he applied for and secured this position, and served in this capacity for two and a half years. He even got an opportunity to work closely under Annie Besant in Adyar. She urged him to serve as Principal of Aligarh Dharmasamaj High school which he did for five years to everyone's satisfaction. She inspired him to become a staunch theosophist and urged him to serve his own community as best as he could, which he did to a degree she would have hardly even imagined in her wildest dreams. But he so often referred to her in his lectures to us and others. She remained his inspiration for life. From all I read she was a noble soul. Though what I read later on about other theosophist leaders, Col. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky appalled me. Incidentally, Dr. Wadia's article confirms what rumors we as kids heard about him not accepting any gifts from anyone when in Aligarh - even when his mother chided him for it. He never compromised his principles and integrity, and cherished his independence. He was a perfect example of Shakespeare's counsel, "To thine own self be true". However, this forthright nature, though not insolent or abrasive, often did not endear him to the ego-centric trustees of the institutions he served, though he will be the last one you may come to know of it, given his stoicity. I do not remember him complaining about anything except about common ills facing the country or community, or about, for example, others not using the title of 'Sir' for Rustom Masani when he gave me a recommendation letter to him. He never complained about summer heat in his apartment, even when I for one found it intolerable, and even though from the lacs of rupees in Ashodad he gave away to charities he could have afforded a thousand air conditioners. That reminds me of K. R. Cama, who per J. J. Modi, would continue working in the humid heat of Bombay summer rather than going to hill resorts.

## **AS PRINCIPAL OF SURAT PARSİ BOYS ORPHANAGE**

He left Aligarh in December of 1919, as some Goonda threatened in writing to kill him, and on learning of it his mother went on fast-unto-death until he returned home. He was soon appointed Principal of Surat Parsi Orphanage, which he served for 27 years as per my recollection. Almost half of the Parsi population, as per my research, then lived outside of Bombay, mostly

in the hinterlands of Gujarat, where they had less and less means of livelihood, and no support system like Panchayats in the big cities, especially for the orphaned children. The surviving parents brought their sons and simply entrusted them to him, saying “From now on he is yours. Mould him into a good adult”. There were only 17 boys in the orphanage when he joined it, but many more when he left it. Not only he taught them as best as he can, but also inspired them to be successful adults in various careers, and they often told me so when I ran into them. He learned typing, sowing, tailoring, etc. so as to teach these to the students. He particularly delighted in treating their wounds and illnesses, and he continued doing it at the Cama too every morning. With his efforts, the orphanage was qualified for starting matriculation classes and pursuing higher studies. In 1925 he started Magic Lantern to show slides for learning purposes, and he photographed and made slides himself. In 1928, the orphanage bought equipment for silent movies, and in 1936 for talkies for the entertainment of the orphaned boys.

He also joined and introduced Boys Scouts, commercial and trade training, sports, gymnasium, first aid, science lab, etc. He enjoyed holding a session once a week, when any student can ask him any question under the sun, and he provided the answers from his vast knowledge, a practice he continued at the Cama, where we could ask him the meaning of any word in the English language, and he never failed us in providing the right answer. He regularly gave lectures in Surat and Gujarat villages as well as in Bombay. Any Parsi raised in Surat then knew about his many accomplishments, as well as his truly spiritual character, and held him in highest esteem. He gave benefit of his knowledge and talents freely to others, but never tried to benefit from it in any way. It is not surprising therefore that reportedly he expressed his sincere concern about how Khojeste Mistree will survive financially when Khojeste first met him, and told him he wants to be a full-time preacher. Mistree reportedly made light of his concern later on when he managed to thrive so well financially as a preacher, if not as a full-time preacher-politician. But there was a tradition amongst us not to live off religion as a preacher, but everyone, including lay scholars and Dasturs, preached honorarily only. Dabu found it hard to feed his students at the orphanage but refused to resort to the black market to feed them. He also refused to attend any farewell function for him and quietly slipped away home. When the students and teachers caught up with him there, however, he became tearful and speechless.

## **DABU'S INDEPENDENCE AND INTEGRITY**

Dabu lived so frugally on his salary as a Dastur, that Dastur Kotwal, who had a young family to support, told me often that the salary was nowhere enough to defray even his basic expenses. But his frugality and forthrightness stood him in good stead in not yielding to pressures from any quarters. Still he

was maligned by the orthodox and Ilme-Khshnumists for signing the Declaration of Fourteen Dasturs (Chaud Dastur No Khardo), under the leadership of Sir Rustom Masani, himself an Ervad, who was concerned about the high priests not agreeing even on basic issues. As Masani's sons had married out the orthodox insinuated that it was merely a ploy on his part to forward a liberal plank. Dabu held firm but in the end the decibel level of the orthodox noise got so high it forced some of the signatories to withdraw their support. But Dabu saw it as a right move and did not budge. Even as many high priests in his times firmly upheld that there was no conversion at all in Zoroastrianism, he did not shy away from boldly declaring: "There is nothing to prevent any one not bom a Parsi from professing his spiritual allegiance to Zarathustra and adopting his message... thus Zoroastrianism is still open to adoption by the world to which the religion was offered." (*Message of Zarathustra*, p. 16). Even though he was orthodox in many ways, such honesty did not endear him to the orthodox, who already were critical of him as a theosophist - the only formally theosophist Dastur in our history. But he preached what he saw as truth: "the message preached by Zarathustra was meant to be a world religion, as it embraced immutable Divine laws applicable to humanity," (*Zarathustra and His Teachings*, p.22). He was often known to say Zoroastrianism is not anyone's property. When consulted, he had often opined that a Parsi woman does not cease to be a Zoroastrian just because she marries out, unless she renounces her religion. I confirmed its veracity with a relative, himself an ex-student of Dabu, who consulted him when his daughter married a Goan. Dabu somehow thought it fit to have the Navjotee recite the Kemna Mazda prayer, even though it went against the centuries old priestly tradition. Despite severe and consistent objections to it, Dabu continued this practice all his life after giving his reason for it. But the orthodox kept protesting against it forever. Thus, in many ways he was not a typical orthodox Dastur.

I was surprised to learn from Feroza H. M. Seervai's poetic-cry in *Parsiiana* (May 2003, p. 4) that the present Dasturs maintain that: "The law provides merely a contract / Ashirwad makes marriage a sacrament /... Do not marry by law," that is civil marriages are not recognised in Zoroastrianism. Now this Fatwa is so much in contradiction with what Dastuiji Dabu advised me in writing in 1966, when I wrote to him about my own sad situation of not finding a Mobed to perform my Ashirwad in USA. He forthrightly advised me that a civil marriage was well and good enough for my circumstances. Fortunately I have preserved his reply in Gujarati.

## **AS THE PRINCIPAL OF CAMA ATHORNAN INSTITUTE (1946 - 48)**

As I was growing up in Surat, Dabu's name was well known there among all communities. I remember my theosophist father taking me regularly to hear his lectures at Annie Besant Hall, where the presence of other communities predominated. However, I came in direct contact with him only when he became the Principal of M. F. Cama Athoman Institute, Andheri on August 1, 1946, when I was ten years old. Rumors were afloat amongst us kids then, that he was an ultra-strict teacher, and we were at first very terrified when we first learned of his appointment. To this day I remember him walking into the Institute with his wife and daughter and his baggage. But such fears proved to be unjustified, though his demeanor always remained stoic, stern and strict. I still remember very vividly when tears came rolling off his eyes, an extremely rare phenomenon, when he said he will miss us when we were going on a month-long summer vacation. He added that he found us Athoman kids much better behaved, compliant, and disciplined than the orphans he had to deal with at his prior posting as the Principal of the Surat Parsi Orphanage, where he often had to resort to meting out physical punishments to the students. He did not have to do it at the Cama's except once, which was witnessed by me personally and was due rather to his misrepresenting a student's behavior. His presence enhanced the spiritual milieu at the Institute, and uplifted our morale, which permeated throughout the Institute.

Our classes began with a prayer he selected from the Gathas (Yasna 33.12-14), followed by a 10 - 15 minute sermon by senior students every morning, which he commented on with his own wise and well-informed remarks, no matter what the topic was. He was a voracious reader, and seemed to be very conversant with most subjects. We saw him reading or writing all the time when he was not teaching. However, he did not like us to memorize our sermons like a parrot to impress others. He spoke extempore, and exhorted us to do the same. In order to encourage us to do so, he would employ hat-tricks, by asking us to place our names in one basket, and place the topics we want someone to address in another basket, and he will pick up the name from the first basket, and the name of the topic from the other one, and ask us to speak extempore on that topic. He would encourage us to ask him questions on any topic on our religion, and would respond instantly and knowledgeably to our queries. He would even encourage us to ask him the meaning of any English word, and he will invariably explain it by tracing its Latin roots. His classes on religion were so interesting and inspiring, that we all listened to him with rapt attention. He never ever resorted to notes, and he closed his eyes as he spoke to us, because he did not want to waste his eyesight unnecessarily. We saw him reading in his office when he was not teaching, and he inculcated the habit of reading in us.

He would ride his bicycle even when he was around 60, after we were all done playing sports. He attended our evening prayers unflinchingly. Every morning he set aside some time to nurse our wounds and injuries, and was adept at bandaging them himself, and enjoyed doing it. He may have had a latent, unconscious wish to be a physician. He loved dogs who always followed him around. He was a strict vegetarian almost all his life. He lived with his wife and daughter in a two-story building adjunct to the Institute. His wife was a devout Zoroastrian, and was fully devoted to him, from what we saw and heard. He chose to perform the Navjote Ceremony of his granddaughter (who later became a lawyer and married a Hindu lawyer) at the Institute, and all the ordained priests amongst us students participated in it. He had also devised a Zoroastrian prayer on the model of the Jashan prayer, that as per him could be performed in the presence of non-Zoroastrians, and I was very much impressed by it, but Dr. J. N. Unwala, an orthodox board member of the Institute (and a distant relative of mine, and later my Avesta Professor) objected to it, and forced him to desist from performing it there. Dabu abided by it, as he was left with no choice in the matter. However, he became a Dastur soon after that, and does not seem to have performed it again. His forthright nature often put him at odds with the Board of Trustees, a phenomenon too common in the Parsi institutions. However, during his short presence in Bombay, his lectures and writings such as *Athravan No Dini Prakash* and *Rahnumae Din in Jame Jamshed* every week made him very popular, and he was appointed as the seventh High Priest of Wadia Atashbehrum on June 5, 1948, even before he served out his two and a half year contract as the Principal of M.F. Cama Institute. My guess is the trustees of the Institute were relieved to see him leave, and they never appointed a principal of his stature thereafter. Even as he accepted the Dasturship, he expressed hope that it will not interfere with his preference for being true to himself, and for independent thinking.

My initial experience with him was reassuring. I attended his lecture in Surat on my own, during a vacation break, and quoted from it in the final exam, and to my surprise got the highest mark – 80%, though I was in the lowest standard (grade), and the other one who also got 80% was my older brother, who was in the highest standard, Dastuiji combining three standards together for his religious class. To this day I remembered what I heard him saying in 1946, but I find it hard to translate it in English, because it does not lend itself to easy translation into English, and because I do not find equivalent words in English for a simile he cited. But his words come close to St. Augustine's: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee." I continued to attend his lectures before and after leaving India in 1965, as I found them very inspirational and enlightening, and as he hardly ever repeated the same theme or ideas in his lectures. I found nobody else coming up to his standards then and now. He also wrote one full-page

article under the heading of “Athrawan No Dini Prakash”(A priest’s light on Religion or Religious Light) and “Rahunamae Din” (Guidance For/From Religion) every Monday, which were later published in the book format.

He spoke and wrote in a very simple but inspiring style, which delivered his message home. He was equally at home talking about Gatha or Gita, Shahnameh or Ramayana, Avesta or Bible, or lecturing in Gujarati or English. But unlike Dasturji Dhalla, he wrote in Parsi Gujarati and not in Shuddha Gujarati, which, however, could make an easier read for the present Parsi generation.

He was a very strict disciplinarian. We were all struck by the fact that he refused to let a student attend his mother’s wedding when she remarried, as well as when he did not take time off for attending his own daughter’s wedding but kept working as usual. But he distributed Jalebee to everyone of us on his birthday every year. He kept working as usual throughout the day even after attending an all-night Vendidad ceremony performed by two students at the Institute, even as we were feeling so tired and drowsy. He donated all the money he received as Ashodad for performing Navjotes, weddings, etc., but someone put him in trouble with the Income tax Department for not reporting his income or so. However, he came out fine, and even continued to donate his Ashodad money in the name of its donor after, I believe, keeping one rupee as a token payment, the receipt for all the Ashobad money going to the donor. He is known to have performed, inter-alia, about 1,500 weddings and about 1,700 Navjotes but he never stayed along after these ceremonies were over, nor did he allow any dinners to be sent to his home as was the custom then, if not now. He put on the Dasturi shawl only when performing the ceremonies, and refused to perform ceremonies in hotels, as he felt they lacked purity required for holding religious ceremonies. For the same reason, he refused to go abroad though invited often, I was told by Ervad Nader Turel, who was close to him. He established on scriptural evidence that the Mukhtad ceremony should consist of ten days only, which has now become the norm. He also realized that the higher-level mobeds were becoming rarer and rarer, so he encouraged the mobeds of different sects to act as one. So I was not surprised to see Surti mobeds performing Boi in his Wadiaji Atashbehram when I visited it lately. (Dabu was also relatively broadminded in his political views and fully endorsed Anne Beasant’s Home Rule League for India for achieving political independence.) Dabu evinced foresight, broad-mindedness, and pragmatism, despite his moorings in the ultra-orthodox nineteenth century. He would have been even more progressive and pragmatic if he was born later. When there are no mobeds available in the future, a logical extension of this principle would be to allow Behdins (laymen) as para-mobeds or even full-fledged mobeds. Unfortunately, however, the Parsi mentality vis-a-vis the Irani Zoroastrian mentality is for going for all-or-nothing, and against any change, even if it

means self-destruction. But the circumstances have compelled the Irani Zoroastrians to accept the reality facing them in order to survive. Even though theosophists tended to be ultra-orthodox, and even though Dabu too discouraged intermarriages, he did so on social grounds. His concern was also for the Parsi women and their offspring being rejected by their in-laws, and so instead of living in a religious limbo, he preferred for her and her children to accept her husband's religion, and live in religious peace. Intermarriages, however, were then not as rampant, and not as seriously threatening the very existence of our community as at present. Being pragmatic and a wise and serious thinker, he would have seen the need for some adjustment in the community's lose-lose, zero-sum attitude to intermarriages. Alas! How long one has to wait for that to happen!

### **AS THE DASTUR OF WADIA ATASHBEHRAM (1947-1977)**

As a Dastur, he led a very simple life, and gave all the Ashirwad money he got for performing various religious ceremonies to charities, amounting in lacs of rupees then and now. I could not by nature tolerate heat, and always tried to escape the heat in any way I can, but Dastuiji Dabu was content to have a fan when he could afford a thousand air conditioners. I kept in contact with him, even after I immigrated to USA for higher studies in 1965, and sought his advice about civil marriage with my Zoroastrian bride, when no Zoroastrian priest was available there then. His advice was more liberal than the Dasturs of our times, most of whom I knew personally. I attended his lectures on Saturdays in the Anjuman Atashbehram when I was in Bombay, and continued to attend them when I visited Bombay. My father was also a great admirer of Dabu, and would not miss his lectures – so much so, that on my visit to India, I once urged him to wait for me for attending his lecture, but he would not like to be late for Dabu's lecture, and went forth ahead of me. Indeed, when he came to see me at the Cama Institute, and asked Dastuiji in my presence if he remembered him, Dastuiji told him he remembered him coming to his Avesta classes in Surat and also bringing others in his car. He even described the car, but then and only then I learned that he knew my father, and that he held Avesta classes in Surat. Such was his stoicism and reticence.

Dastuiji was gracious enough to write recommendation letters for me very willingly year after year, to various institutions as was the vogue in India then. I could hear him say nice things about me to his neighbor as I ran down the stairs. I invited Dastuiji to give a speech on Religion and Social Service at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, (TISS), Chembur, Bombay, and the students were so very enthralled and impressed by his speech. It was chaired by Prof. A. R. Wadia, the Director of the Institute, who was a classmate of Dastuiji at Wilson College in Bombay. He had nothing but nice words to say about the

Dasturji, and revealed that while the other Parsi co-students were rather feasting and frolicking around, Dasturji was always sober and studious. Even as all students, mostly non-Parsis, were quite swept off their feet by his extempore thought-provoking speech, as usual without any notes, a very dear Parsi professor of mine made no comments about his speech at all, but shocked me by commenting on his wrinkled clothes which was due, however, to his wife becoming totally blind by then (in 1959) – he having to take care of her and himself, and not relying on others for it. It was such a privilege to escort him in the Institute’s car from Wadiaji Atashbehrām to Chembur, but when I tried to escort him back, he preferred to ride all alone, and advised me to do my studies, and not spend any more time on him. Wise use of time was so critical to him, and it rubbed off on me. His non-materialist outlook also played a great part in his simplicity – simple living and high thinking being his motto all his life, unlike some present-day preachers following high-living and simple thinking or thinking at all.

### **Ilme Kshnumists’ Opposition to Dabu’s Dasturship**

Many orthodox Parsis resented his appointment as the High Priest of Wadiaji Atashbehrām in Bombay in 1948 because he was a theosophist. Ilme Kshnumists were particularly critical of him, though as per Mary Boyce Ilme Kshnum is a thoroughgoing orientation of theosophy, and though he lived next to the founder of Ilme Kshnum, Ustad Behramshah Shroff (1858-1927) in Surat, who reportedly liked him enough to make him executor of his will (or so). We kids anxiously awaited reading the Ilme Kshnumist weekly, Parsi Awaz, every Sunday. It contained carping criticisms of Dabu, but Dabu just talked it down as Dhobhighaat where washer-men washed others’ dirty linen. Dabu outlasted Parsi Awaz by far. Even after his death he was criticized for his theosophist leaning, and Khojeste Mistree even brought it up in a paper he presented in some conference in Israel, on the ground that it did not allow Dabu to maintain and preach the true Zoroastrian tradition. Mistree himself has advocated a deviation from Asho Zarathushtra’s teachings while blindly following the tradition scholastically propounded by Mary Boyce, a topsyturvy tradition rooted in Sassanian dualism and pre-Zoroastrian beliefs, in which Zarathushtra’s place as the prophet is hardly discernible. As Gherardo Gnoli strongly maintains, “On the contrary, we must read against this tendency fairly common nowadays (even Ms. Boyce is not entirely immune from it), which aims at leveling Zoroaster in a context – often arbitrarily constructed, what is more – that ends up by obscuring all the traits of his personality and the originality of his work: according to this tendency, Zoroaster did not invent anything, not even the name of his God and the reformation that has hitherto borne his name is no other than the result of a slow process of development of a traditional religion, and even the earlier rites and cults remained essentially unchanged, and so on... Now, I am convinced that Zoroaster was, on the

*contrary, a unique case.* (*Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naplas, 1980, p. 192.) More on it at another time and occasion.

However, those who have no exposure to scholars and traditions other than Boyce, and follow Boyce blindly do great harm to Asho Zarathushtra by emphasizing the later Zoroastrian tradition at the expense of the unique contribution of the prophet himself, who in essence was sent by God on this earth (Yasna 29.8), and who in the Gathas obviously rails against many practices and traditions of his times. Gathas provides us a clear evidence of it. Unfortunately Boyce's initial interest, besides English literature, was dualistic Manichaeism often a synonym for dualism, and then Sassanian Zoroastrianism – a period of 1000 years or more since Zarathushtra. Nevertheless, she tended to interpret Zoroastrianism in terms of her first impression of it, though eventually she has studied Zoroastrianism more extensively and devotedly than anyone I know of, and we should ever be grateful to her for it. Those who followed Boyce's views tend to undercut or minimize the contribution of Zarathushtra, and compromise his great stature and contribution as a prophet. But Dabu always emphasized the greatness of our prophet and religion and theosophy only made him other worldly and saintly. It hardly colored or distorted his view of Zoroastrianism.

Theosophy was extremely popular among the Parsis in Dabu's days, and many orthodox Parsis found in it a vehicle for expounding and even supporting their orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthodox beliefs. He did not claim the elite status of possessing an esoteric key to the Avesta, as Ilme-Khshnumists ostensibly simulate, even when such esoterism has no place in the teachings of Asho Zarathushtra. As professor W.B. Hennings once remarked, Zoroastrianism is the most rational of all religions.

Dabu had a Master's degree and a gold medal in Avesta-Pahlavi, and seemed to know where to draw the line, and I for one do not recall Dabu preaching theosophy PER SE. Instead, he gave prominence to Zoroastrian tradition and teachings first, and referred to similar theosophical wisdom only if it coincided with Zoroastrianism in his view, even when at odds with the standard scholarly opinion, such as on reincarnation. One reason for the latter was his firm belief that without reincarnation we cannot explain the working of God, and actual examples of some living beings vividly remembering their past life strengthened this view. In the final analysis, such beliefs impressed him as helpful in understanding the meaning of life and mystery of nature, philosophical minded as he was. But otherwise, Zoroastrian he remained to the core, up to his last in his theology and beliefs, and exhorted us to realize our utmost spiritual progress in the present life. Moreover, under the Hindu milieu the common Parsi believed in reincarnation, and even such a profound Avesta scholar as Taraporewala interpreted certain Gathic verses as denoting reincarnation, and Dabu often quoted them.

When we once asked him in the religion classes at the Cama Institute if he had had any mystical experiences in his life, he replied that the only time he had experienced it was just before giving a lecture on Atash Nyaesh, when he saw himself surrounded by beautiful light, (like something similarly described in Yasna 30.1 I would say), which for him reinvigorated the significance of fire in Zoroastrianism. Thus, true to Zoroastrianism he was to the core. Yet, ironically, it was the Ilme-Kshnumists who objected to his appointment as a Dastur, though Mary Boyce, Haug, and others have contended that Ilme-Kshnum is basically copied from theosophy. I had known and admired Dr. Irach J. S. Taraporewala, a theosophist, as a very learned man, but also as an exceptionally mild mannered scholar. Even he had harsh words for Ilme-Kshnumists while presiding over the birth anniversary celebration of K. R. Cama and referred to how Dr. Martin Haug turned down their claim to be genuinely Zoroastrian. Cama was always interested in learning everything he can about our religion, and so he invited the founder of Ilme-Kshnum to Bombay, but ultimately was disappointed in finding nothing genuine or authentic in Ilme-Kshnum. Dabu's response, as usual, to Ilme-Kshnumists was to respond to them minimally, so he can carry on his mission as best as he can. Indeed, he fulfilled his mission so well, that few knew then and fewer still today about his critics. Only his pious memory prevails today.

Dabu's interest was not in promoting the belief in theosophy or reincarnation *per se*, but in inspiring people to take Asha and religion seriously, and leading a Zoroastrian life, etc, so as to attain salvation. He himself fulfilled Asho Zarathushtra's injunction to fulfill all one can in one's life, perhaps more than any Parsi in his times, and that speaks volumes. He also explained the theosophist (and later Ilme-Kshnumist) belief in certain immortal souls guarding us entirely in Zoroastrian and Avestan terms. Theosophy may not have been a perfect vehicle then to guide man's souls, but in the absence of basic knowledge about our religion which came on later, it attracted many Parsis with religious inclinations. Dabu need not be judged by his association with theosophy, but for his stoic, saintly, progressive, and inspiring character that shaped the life and career of all his students for good as well as for spreading the message of Asho Zarathushtra, whenever and wherever he could, until he breathed his last, like nobody else in his times. Unfortunately, it is so common nowadays to find criticism of our Dasturs, but Dabu always remained above such criticism by his steadfastness, and being true to his calling. It is time to have a Dabu reincarnate to restore the prestige of our Dasturs.

## **An Appeal For a Fitting Dabu Memorial**

It pains me to note that we have not fulfilled our duty to the Dastur who freely gave everything life offered him, even his hard earned income, to the community, and have not even raised an appropriate memorial to him, even

after almost 30 years since he has passed away. A committee needs to be appointed to commemorate his life and work. Since he was a prolific writer, speaker, and donor, permanent essay and elocution competition prizes on his life and work in particular, and on Zoroastrianism in general, would be for example, an appropriate tribute to him. Let us not fail in our duty. May his pious soul rest in Garothman and guide us from there. Amen!